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Songs We Learn from Trees: An Anthology of Ethiopian Amharic Poetry

Chris Beckett and Alemu Tebeje, eds and trans. Carcanet, Manchester 2020, pb, 304pp, £18.99 ISBN 9781784109479 | <https://www.carcanet.co.uk>

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Deservedly a finalist of the 2021 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry, this anthology of Ethiopian poetry has been compiled with scholarly care and evident linguistic dedication to the source material. The editors and translators, Chris Beckett and Alemu Tebeje, offer us a chronologically and thematically sweeping overview of poetry originally composed in Amharic (and, for the second half of the twentieth century onwards, sometimes originally in English). The range of styles and tones is impressive: from sorrowful love laments and witty socio-political satire to tense existentialist poems and sombre historical meditations.

The anthology opens with a section that displays all the verbal inventiveness of traditional poetic genres, such as the compact punch of ‘Do not pass my gate, you bureaucrats/I will throw you in the fire, like rats’ (24), or the famous wax-and-gold double entendre of the *qəne*: ‘What use is t’ella? What use is t’ej?/When you see the enemy, serve him coffee’ (41; hidden ‘golden’ meaning: burn him to ashes!).

Those who love the poetry of the 1960s will recognise Mengistu Lemma’s playful and light-hearted, but

no less scathing, satire in a poem that jokes on the many mysterious pockets of Western clothing (‘many pockets lead to many questions/and all of them are empty/of an answer’ (89)), Gebre Kristos Desta’s sensorial and visionary experimentalism:

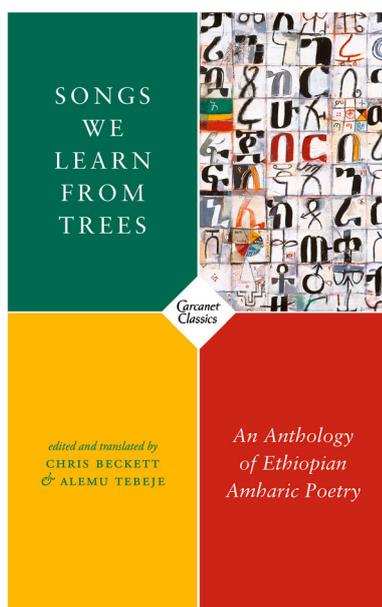
the sound of music
is all over
is everywhere.
In the crackling of leaves
in the spluttering of water drops
at dawn, in the night, in the light and at dusk
or in emptiness
to arise with the birth of musical sentiments
from the sky, from the depths (68)

and Tsegaye Gebre Medhin’s trademark mix of pessimist despair and stubborn vitalism:

As long as there are morning birds
to fill the air with songs
as long as there are folk tales
to be told by the fireside
as long as there are children
who kick and riot with joy
I shall bathe in the shimmer of the moon
I shall inherit the sun
I shall follow the rainbow’s trail (70)

The next section on contemporary poets gives us two of the founders of the vibrant Tobiya Poetic Jazz festival in Addis Ababa: Mihret Kebede’s philosophical wordplay (‘Why do we even make plans?/Being human is like being the plan/of another planner/planet,/so that in some ways you are always/a plant in some-one else’s plan’ (136)) and Misrak Terefe’s visceral longing (‘my nose splinters/one nostril sniffs for you,/the other puffs out smoke from a cigarette/ ... oh! come, please come and stitch/my senses back together’ (191–92)).

The poets of the Ethiopian diaspora in the UK and United States are given a dedicated section at the end of the volume, where we hear from the celebrated Ethio-British poet Lemn Sissay (‘Here I hear all the footsteps of the world/reverberate in the beneath-me-rocks/trying to find your first person singular steps,trying to find a sentence in history’ (230)), from US-based poet and painter Kebedech Tekleab (‘this age of exile/spins without uncoiling,/tangles



without threading,/and before its cotton-life begins/it announces its end' (237)), and from Alemu Tebeje himself, with a gut-wrenching poem on the Grenfell Tower fire: 'look! the fire consumed a building/now it is consuming me/with all the burning voices of the dead' (235).

In an interview for the online portal *Words Without Borders*, Chris Beckett said he would have loved to include the Amharic originals, and indeed a bilingual Amharic–English anthology would have been powerful for all those whose biographies, work, or intellectual and political projects straddle the two languages. Anthologies are, by definition, canon-setting, and Beckett and Tebeje are careful to point out their selection is just the tip of the iceberg and has its inevitable biases (13). One is language: the choice of Amharic reflects the translators' language expertise, but inevitably excludes the many other languages in which Ethiopian poetry is composed. The other is gender: the translators made a point of including as many women as possible in their selection, but women only appear in the latter part of the anthology. In the same interview, Beckett observes that the present-day poetic scene is still skewed in favour of male poets. Women poets, however, do not hesitate to bite back: 'you [men] were the prototype/He sketched you first/before He dreamed me into being/as the finished product' (126), writes Meron Getnet.

If lovers of literature will delight in the aesthetic virtuosity of the poems, literary historians might be left wanting for a more robust scholarly apparatus. The volume signals whether each poem was first written in Amharic or English, and the names of other translators are listed in the acknowledgements, but this could have been enriched with further bibliographical information about the Amharic originals, such as year of publication, for example, or the poems' original titles. Still, this anthology is a painstaking declaration of love for the poetic traditions of Ethiopia and its diaspora, and will likely make the reader fall in love with these traditions as well.

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Tomb of Sand

Geetanjali Shree, trans. by Daisy Rockwell

Tilted Axis Press, London and Sheffield

2021, pb, 737pp, £12.00

ISBN 9781911284611 | <https://tiltedaxispress.com>

Published in Hindi in 2018, *Tomb of Sand* is divided into three parts, which do not flow in 'a single stream' but form three separate 'lakes', in a metaphor this knowing, self-reflexive narrative uses to describe itself (43). In the first part, we see an eighty-year-old woman, Ma, lose all interest in life after her husband passes away; she literally turns her back on the world to face a wall and announce that she is never going to get up again. Her 'No' then becomes a 'Nyooo' and she does get up presently to begin life 'anew' (20, 21) — in an instance of wordplay nicely replicated in English. (In Hindi, it was her '*nahin*' (no) turning '*naeen*' (never) into '*nai*' (new).)

In the second part, Ma moves from the care and protection of her son to stay temporarily with her daughter, who is unconventionally unmarried but has a fitful partner. Anyhow, mother, daughter, and partner are all eclipsed by a *hinjra*, a transgender character who comes out of nowhere to begin visiting Ma, and who, with her uninhibited social ways, thoroughly re-energises her. Portrayed as first female and then male, this *hinjra* is a far more rounded and fascinating figure than, for example, the *hinjra* with whom Arundhati Roy begins her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (also first published in 2018).

